

First Listen Closely: Establishing a University Center for Educator Professional Development

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Abstract: The literature on teaching centers and faculty development increasingly recognizes teaching centers are well-positioned to support institutional effectiveness activities. There is critical importance in collaborating with educators to establish topics of engagement, positioning, and partnership including the importance of stakeholder buy-in, which can be enhanced or promoted by the inclusion of stakeholders' voices in center planning and decision-making. Many teaching and learning centers historically focused on *faculty* as primary stakeholders, but welcoming, seeking out, and embracing a diversity of thoughts, perspectives, and ideas in voices represented by adopting a widely inclusive definition of *educator* is vital to a successful teaching center establishment. This case study shares the intentional design of educator listening activities for center development.

Keywords: stakeholder engagement, center for teaching and learning, designing structures of support, faculty professional development

Wright, Lohe, and Little (2018) stated teaching and learning centers “connect disciplines, resources, and educational constituents in order to support instructors and move institutional initiatives forward” (p. 39). This point of purpose is reified by Cook and Kaplan (2011), whose research also showed teaching centers are well-positioned to support institutional effectiveness activities. They posited that “staff at teaching centers typically have much experience working with academic administrators and faculty on critical assessment-related tasks, such as defining local instructional needs, helping faculty work collaboratively, facilitating conversations and events that will prompt curricular enhancements, and providing resources to support follow-up and implementation of changes” (p.123). The value of such units in higher education institutions is well established and demonstrated by the commonality of their occurrence; for example, the POD Network (2022) maintains a list of 1,291 teaching centers located globally. Given this context, an institution of higher education that has never had a centralized unit dedicated to supporting professional development in teaching and learning would be in the minority. Michigan State University (MSU), a large, decentralized, research-focused university has been in this position; historically it never had a teaching center. Between 2019 and 2022, MSU embarked on efforts to establish a center for teaching and learning to support its many educators.

In a study of teaching and learning centers, Beckley (2022) found common examples of positioning and partnership, including the importance of stakeholder buy-in, which can be enhanced or promoted by including stakeholders' voices in center planning and decision-making. For many teaching and learning centers, the historical focus has been on *faculty* as primary stakeholders. However, welcoming, seeking out, and embracing diverse thoughts, perspectives, and ideas in represented voices are essential. Literature on teaching centers and faculty development increasingly recognizes the importance of collaborating with educators on topics

from curriculum design to assessment (Sorcinelli et al., 2005). For MSU, this means embracing a widely inclusive definition of “educator” (e.g., faculty, academic staff, graduate teaching assistants, undergraduate learning assistants, librarians, information technology and residence hall staff, and coaches) (Skogsberg et al., 2021, p. 184).

This paper highlights experience design aspects in the Center for Teaching and Learning’s early development stages that were critical to building buy-in, determining a service and programming portfolio, and establishing iterative processes to keep center efforts relevant to adult learners served. As the cornerstone activity for launching MSU’s Center for Teaching and Learning Innovation (CTLI or the Center), “listening” required keen attention to detail, acknowledgment of institutional histories, audience engagement, and future commitment to ongoing listening; all of which are imperative for building necessary relationships and trust.

Background

Their beliefs and conceptions of teaching and learning greatly influence educators’ approaches to teaching in higher education (Postareff et al., 2007). Industry members know beliefs and conceptions are highly dependent on educators’ experiences as *learners* in higher education (Mundy et al., 2012). Because universities usually hire instructors for their content expertise, instructor exposure to training in positive teaching and learning practices is highly variable. It is well established that the pipeline of future faculty (i.e., terminal degree programs and doctoral studies) varies widely in their structured opportunities for teaching development (Rutz et al., 2012). As graduates enter the profession of an early-career faculty member, it is critical to provide “...on-going professional development opportunities to enable the scholar who teaches his subject to become a meaningful teacher of students, a true educator.” (Mundy et al., 2012, p. 2). All the while, instructors’ orientation to teaching and learning is influenced by their institutions’ classifications and their disciplinary fields. This complexity of teaching and learning in higher education further establishes the need to provide educators with opportunities to learn about effective teaching through professional development (Connolly & Miller, 2006).

Design & Approach

On January 14, 2022, the MSU CTLI held its *Kick-off Summit*, the first step in creating opportunities and dedicated spaces for the Center’s primary audience — educators — to share their ideas and expectations for this novel (in institutional history) centralized unit. Recognizing diverse efforts already underway to support educators at different levels across the university, CTLI held the first-of-many event intending to build on existing efforts through listening, collaboration, and relationship building.

The Summit’s team-based leadership comprised a collaborative team of six educational developers representing four centralized units whose missions’ supported educators in their ongoing development led the Summit. This team identified an audience for this initial listening experience, defined core language, designed ideation activities, analyzed data, and reported findings broadly. As an institution, MSU generally employs a decentralized structure for educator support and development. The Summit team identified participants as existing educator development and support professionals at MSU (across colleges, units, and departments); thus, establishing definitional congruence was vital prior to the event.

I must acknowledge the effects of the global COVID-19 pandemic throughout the planning and execution of the Summit event. For the two years preceding the Summit, public health concerns fueled a state of destabilization and chaos worldwide. Especially during the COVID-19 Delta variant's influx, the event team prioritized health and safety and could not safely facilitate the Summit in person. In an attempt to recreate the experience of hands-on activities traditionally used during sessions designed for in-person participation, the Summit planning team sent all confirmed participants a box of event staples (e.g., snacks, handouts, writing utensils) to increase a sense of community throughout the event. Additionally, the Summit used MURAL, a web-based visual collaboration platform, to facilitate the event.

The 37 individuals attending engaged in three core activities related to establishing a shared vision, engagement norming and principles of collaboration, and initial CTLI service portfolio prioritization. The first activity asked participants to identify big ideas they could group into common themes and inform a shared vision for the Center, MSU educator network, and teaching and learning broadly. Participants individually answered the prompt "Wouldn't it be fantastic if" and organized statements to show what the Center might influence, control, or create. This activity led naturally to the second activity, which asked participants to assume one of five roles (Academic Unit Administrators, Faculty and Instructors, Center Affiliated Staff, College Affiliated Staff, and University-Wide Staff). The activity challenged each role-based group to outline what from the other four groups they would need to succeed. The third activity aimed at identifying a minimum viable product for the CTLI service portfolio by asking participants to write reviews of the Center as if they had experienced a positive encounter. These reviews were used to identify themes of both topics/content areas as well as format (such as workshop, panel, consultation, etc.).

Major Themes

The three scaffolded activities led participants through visioning, norming, and portfolio building. In visioning exercises, stakeholders identified various needs they categorized as ed-tech support, resources, staffing, space, and coordination/planning. Participants seemed to hope to build a network for these services, such as a "shared list of experts across campus to make finding the right person to ask easier". Another statement underscored the networking theme: "explicit partnerships and shared services between the teaching center and other key support units." Specific services most frequently mentioned included support for DEI in instruction and fostering innovative practices, instructional design, and pedagogy. Consulting, training, and similar events' delivery formats are most often associated with the center.

While engaged in role-playing the various stakeholder roles, three overlapping primary themes emerged from each group; this convergence pointed to commonalities among the groups. All five groups identified the need for a clear and concise service and support portfolio as a need for multiple roles: stakeholders in the Center, Center staff working with stakeholders, and potential partners and patrons of the Center. Additionally, participants across role groups identified a shared need for connection and collaboration. Primarily, group participants wanted other units to collaborate with the Center to figure out ways to connect across boundaries, leveraging and building relationships. Finally, each group identified a concept designated as "teaching and learning in practice," which encompasses many things, including teaching and learning in tenure and promotion, incentivizing teaching and learning, and the scholarship of teaching and learning.

The Summit's final activity aimed to aid in prioritizing a portfolio of services the Center could provide. The goal of a "minimum viable product" activity, framed as a mock online review session, was to discover prioritizing ideas. The activity paired participants as dyads, asking each team to assume the perspective of an educator who had a positive experience while working with the CTLI. Top-mentioned themes in the 17 combined Center *reviews* related to coaching/consultation (64% of reviews), pedagogy and student voice (50%), curricular/modality restructure and redesign (41%), student experience and engagement (41%), educator confidence and empowerment (35%), and collaboration/partnership coordination (35%).

Discussion

According to the literature, centers for teaching and learning impact institutions in two primary ways: Uplifting, facilitating, and amplifying research-informed conversations focused on innovative learning and teaching; and providing quality support for all educators, regardless of experience or background (Singer, 2002). Berg & Haung (2004) posited educator professional development should include high-impact instructional practices and the best methods to incorporate and infuse proven pedagogical theories into undergraduate general education courses to enhance student learning and, ultimately, success. As Mundy et al. (2012) stated, institutions must keep new and experienced faculty members informed and knowledgeable of best practices to promote student learning through proactive, continual professional development in asynchronous and synchronous environments that encourage lifetime learning. Across higher education, instructional best practices are missing from many university and college classrooms. As educators, we have a moral and ethical responsibility to teach in a manner that provides the best learning environment and learning opportunities for every student. We can meet our responsibility by developing a comprehensive professional development series that is easily accessible to all university professors, high school teachers with dual-credit courses, and undergraduate and graduate teacher education students.

Following the CTLI Kick-off Summit, MSU CTLI began benchmarking similar institutions' centers for teaching and learning (CTLs). The results were an informative peek at CTLs with the most important theme being each CTL's focus, structure, and programming was based on meeting institutional needs (i.e., no two CTLs are the same; they are unique based on their institution and their needs). We embraced this empowering realization, along with other benchmarking and Summit data to shape the CTLI for its first semester of active implementation. CTLI established the mission "to support MSU's educators and their practices through collaboration and consultation." The CTLI vision established to complement its mission is:

to support MSU communities where educators work together across roles to provide inclusive, research-informed experiences that support student success; build a path to success for every educator by leading the university with unwavering integrity and a strong culture of teaching and learning; and collaborate with and empower all MSU educators in their engagement in equitable, student-centered teaching and learning practices (Mission and Vision, 2022, para. 2)

The mission and vision, coupled with areas of expertise embodied in CTLI staff, serve as primary guidelines for CTLI programs (e.g., workshops, training, presentations, conferences, and cohort programs) and services (i.e., instructional consultations, curriculum and course design, online program management, and academic entrepreneurship), as well as their partners and affiliates. Institutions of higher education face pressure to change how they do business (i.e., educate students) (Mundy et al., 2012). While specific to building support for educator professional development within a higher education context, intentional design and development of programs, processes, and structures of support for lifelong learning in collaboration with stakeholders are relevant to a much broader professional development designer audience. Based on the literature and implementation of findings from the MSU CTLI case study, we confidently assert that engaging in pre-development listening with stakeholders is critical to initial buy-in, design, and ongoing engagement with lifelong learning support structures and units.

Acknowledgments

This work would not have been possible without the time and energy committed by Jessica Sender (MSU Libraries), Brendan Guenther (CTLI), Dave Goodrich (CTLI), Jeremy Van Hof (Enhanced Digital Learning Initiative), and Stefanie Baier (MSU Graduate School) in designing, facilitating, and evaluating the CTLI Kick-off Summit.

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